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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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If I didn't like New England so much, I seriously consider moving to a warmer and snowless part of the country! If I was only partially tired of winter, it's definitely official now!! Another half foot of snow earlier in the week, with two more storms approaching for tonight and this weekend. Enough already! We've already broken into the top ten records for total snowfall - I think sixth all-time. If the snow is as bad as expected in the next few days, we could reach the top three spots. That's a lot of snow! And the cold! Spring can't get here fast enough to make me happy.

And work! Just when you think things are getting back to "normal", it gets worse. Hard work never frightened me - it's what you have to do. It's the nonsense that drives me crazy. And the politics and butt-kissing. There's just no satisfying some people. Maybe it's time to consider early retirement. That almost sounds like a plan. Well, enough blowing off steam for yet another week. Hopefully I can stay focused enough next week to stick to some more Atari nostalgia!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, Mother Nature is kicking up in the butt again here in the northeast. We're expecting more snow. It's somewhat unusual for the month of March here in these parts, and not only are we expecting a small amount of snow (an inch or three), we had about 5 inches fall last week, and the weather forecasters are watching a weather system that might give us some more snow in another few days. It's times like this that I think back to one of David Letterman's jokes on his late night show....

"One announcement to make before we get underway: Due to the snow and

cold weather, the conference on global warming has been cancelled."
<grin>

Yeah, we can joke about it, we can argue about it... hell, we can even deny it. But despite all the jokes and arguments, we've learned one thing: we haven't learned enough. We have no idea if we are really causing the changes we thing we're seeing, or if its a natural occurrence. In either case, it would seem to me that it would be in our best interests to try to either stop it or slow it down.

Of course, for all I know, we could cause the pendulum to swing back in the other direction and give us exactly the opposite problem. I don't pretend to know what the cause is. I don't even claim to know what effect we can expect. But I can't believe that of either taking an active approach or a passive attitude, that doing nothing is the preferable option.

One group of people that really tick me off are those who do the "save the Earth" thing. You know the ones... they've got all the answers and no one can be right but them. I know several people of this type, and I never pass up a chance to tick them off.

A couple of weeks ago, I got together with a couple of friends and a friend-of-a-friend. "Ah," I thought to myself, "fresh meat".

Before too long, the conversation turned to the weather and the 'fact' that it was a natural outcome of global warming. Now, I happen to believe that it is a consequence of global warming, but I draw the line at calling it a fact. Right now, it's simply a theory.... in the scientific sense of the word, not the populist definition, which is actually what a science-minded person would classify as a hypothesis.

Anyway, when they mentioned "saving the planet". I asked, "From what?"

They looked like I had just kicked them in the... well, you know. "From global warming. From the ozone hole. From overfarming and pollution."

I just smiled and said, "The Earth doesn't need to be saved from any of those things. WE do. If we killed ourselves off tomorrow, the Earth would continue to spin. It would settle back into its own rhythm and probably take little notice of the fact that we were gone... if it had even noticed that we were here in the first place."

As they started to protest I continued, "We are the ones who are affected by what we're doing. The Earth itself will find its own equilibrium and go on. The garbage and sewage and waste that we've visited upon the land and sea would slowly be subducted back into the Earth and get broken down and recycled for the next living things to use and abuse while Mother Earth continued on with less than a twitch. Concrete, steel, glass and even plastic would slowly break down and disappear from sight. Sure it'd take millions of years to remove the scars that we've visited upon her, but that's the thing about old Mother Earth. She's got time to wait. It's not the Earth we need to save, it's ourselves."

They didn't seem to have an answer for that. Maybe I gave them something to think about. Maybe I just gave them another reason to get twitchy. Maybe they'll do both. HEY! A TWO-FER!

Okay, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Last week we took a look at converting PC floppy drives for use on the ST. There's more info this week on it, so let's take a look.

Edward Baiz tells us:

"I converted a TEAC PC drive to be used on a ST by just changing the jumper assignment."

Hallvard Tangeraas tells Edward:

"Yeah, those Teac drives are pretty flexible. Unfortunately they're not widely available any longer. Actually, my experience is that when you go to a PC store (or online PC store) and ask for a floppy disk drive they don't even have the make/model number available. You have to ask them to pick it up and physically look at it to find out.

I'm pretty happy with that Sony drive of mine since it has a zero-Ohm resistor soldered in place and marked for drive 0/1. I'm not sure if all drives have that option, so it might be a gamble to find one that'll work without problems on the ST."

'Chris' tells Hallvard:

"Can't beat the SONY MPF920 drive!"

Hallvard replies:

"So you're using one as well, and it works fine?"

Chris tells Hallvard:

"Put it this way, I've tried A LOT of drives in the past, the MPF920 comes up TOP, and although the older model drives had a jumper link, the 920 does have a PCB jumper link.. Most PC drives laugh at anything over "normal format", most PC drives don't have a jumper link at all..
What can I say apart from the MPF920 is my perfect partner."

'Ed' does a little homework and asks Hallvard and Chris:

"Doing a quick search I find several variants of the Sony MPF920 drive with various letters or numbers (F,L,Z, 1, etc.) after the MPF920 designation. Are there only specific ones that will work as ST replacements, or are any of them viable possibilities?"

Chris tells Ed:

"Hmmm, not sure which revision mine are but they work great.... basically any PC drive will work, BUT you have to locate the drive 0/1 select line, they used to have jumper links on the back of the drive in the good old days, on some drives (like the 920) have a solder link which

you can alter... pot luck really if your chosen drive has it or not...."

Bill Freeman jumps in and tells Hallvard:

"I read that you had put together a file about adapting the Sony drive and I had been looking for it. However, on the ftp site you referenced the file sony_144.zip is only 16kb and it unzips to an empty folder."

Hallvard tells Bill:

"I just checked it, and unfortunately you're right.
I've uploaded it again, and it should work now:

ftp://gem.win.co.nz/hall/hardware/sony_144.zip

(I also included .GIF versions of the previously only .IMG images, which might come in handy for people using PCs -but if you do want to view Atari .IMG images you can download a very nice and free program called "XNview": http://perso.wanadoo.fr/pierre.g/xnview/enhome.html)

For Macs you can use a shareware program called "Graphic converter" for viewing .IMG files: http://www.lemkesoft.de/en/graphcon.htm

PS. when reading the file contents, disregard the stuff about how to use it in high-density mode. The switch method doesn't work (I've tried it) and I haven't had time to try out the DIY circuit projects which I've collected recently though I plan to make use of one of them in time.

The documentation however is correct when it comes to making a standard PC style disk drive work in the ST as a replacement. It'll then work in DD mode (720 Kbytes, double-density)."

Bill tells Hallvard:

"Thank you Hallvard. I got your file OK and the info is exactly what I wanted.

Newegg has new Sony MFP920 drives for $9. I think I will stock up on a few.

Anyone know if it is possible to read a memory stick with an Atari? If there are any SCSI interfaces around for solid state memory it might be feasible. You could pack a lot of Atari programs and data onto a 128mb card."

Bill goes out and buys the drives and comes back to tell us:

I bought 4 new MPF920 Sony drives from NewEgg and they arrived today. Now I need a little more advice from someone who has done this.

1. Disk Detect

There is a switch by, and mechanically liked to, the eject button button labeled "SW3". Is that what you bridge for "disk detect"?

2. Drive Select

Just inboard of pins 10 and 16 of the cable connector there are two pairs of solder pads labelled JC30 and JC31. Next to JC30 it says SEL 0. Next to JC31 it says SEL 1. Across JC31 is soldered a very small rectangular bit with what appears under magnification to be a zero printed on it. Is this the jumper? Is it just a jumper, or is it a discrete component that I have to unsolder from JC31 and move to JC30? This "jumper" is 2mm long and less than 1mm wide. I hope I can move this thing without destroying it or the board. If they figure out how to make this stuff any smaller you will need a microscope to see it."

Hallvard tells Bill:

"Go here: ftp://gem.win.co.nz/hall/hardware/sony_144.zip
It should answer all of your questions."

Steve Sweet jumps in and adds:

"It is a zero ohm resistor, otherwise known as a jumper, if it breaks you can use a piece of wire or provided there's not a PCB track running between the bridge a large solder blob."

Well folks, I know that there's only one conversation here this time, but them's the break, I'm afraid. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - New Xbox Details Revealed!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Nintendo DS Wireless!
                                     'Walk Of Game' Honors!
                                     And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Microsoft Gives First Key Details on New Xbox

Microsoft Corp. on Wednesday gave some of the first key details on the next

generation of its Xbox video game system, which will include an emphasis on high-definition content, an integrated media browser and "microtransactions" for in-game purchases.

In a speech at the Game Developers Conference here, J Allard, the Microsoft executive overseeing the software development tools for the new Xbox, said the new streamlined interface would help draw more users to the platform.

"We've got to create a consistent experience so that consumers can enter our worlds much more easily," he told a packed convention center audience. "If we want to get to 10 or 20 million subscribers we've got to create some consistency."

Microsoft is expected to release the new Xbox in time for the 2005 holidays, but the company has kept mum so far on both timing and the name of the new device.

Among the features Allard demonstrated was an on-screen "Gamer Card" that gives information other players can see on a gamer's location, achievements in various games, time playing specific games and level of skill.

Other features include a custom music player and a "store" where players could make small purchases, for pennies or a few dollars, of new characters, parts for virtual racing cars and the like.

The theme of Allard's speech was the "HD Era," which he described as a time when all games are in high-definition, players are constantly connected through mobile phones, instant messaging and the Internet and gamers can personalize their environments to suit their tastes.

"The HD consumer needs more than a hi-definition Super Bowl," Allard said. "The opportunity is real and now, but make no mistake we have the power to blow it."

Nintendo Plans Wireless Capability for New Console

The next video game console from Japan's Nintendo Co. Ltd. will be ready for wireless Internet gaming and be backwards-compatible with the current generation GameCube, the company said on Thursday.

Nintendo also said it will launch a subscription-free Internet gaming service for its new DS dual-screen hand held gaming device this year. Nintendo's first game for that service will be a version of the hit "Animal Crossing."

The DS is Nintendo's latest hand held while the new console, code-named "Revolution," has not been launched, and Nintendo declined to provide a date.

The console will be powered by a chip developed by IBM code-named "Broadway" and a graphics processor from ATI Technologies Inc. code-named "Hollywood."

Nintendo was the dominant brand in home video game consoles for much of the 1980s and early 1990s, until Sony Corp. entered the market with its PlayStation.

Microsoft Corp. entered the market later with its Xbox. The GameCube is currently in third place in the console market behind Sony’s PS2 and the Xbox.

Nintendo all but ignored the Internet for the GameCube, although both Sony and Microsoft warmly embraced online game play.

Sony has not said when it will release the PS3, while Microsoft is widely expected to launch Xbox 2 for the 2005 holidays. That console also uses chips from IBM and ATI.

All three companies are expected to give further details of their new platforms at the annual E3 industry trade show in May in Los Angeles.

’Walk of Game’ Honors Video Game Icons

Hollywood has its Walk of Fame. Now the video game industry is honoring its icons with Walk of Game.

Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell - the man who produced the minimalist but memorable game "Pong" - and "Donkey Kong" creator Shigeru Miyamoto were among those honored Tuesday with a star on the inaugural Walk of Game section on the floor of a downtown shopping and entertainment center.

Video games have come a long way since Bushnell incorporated Atari Inc. in June 1972, and introduced "Pong" to arcades everywhere later that year. The game premise was simple: two video paddles batted a ball (a tiny white square, actually) back and forth across a dark screen until one player missed.

Thus began the video game rage that has blossomed from a pocket-full-of-quarters pastime into a multibillion dollar global industry.

"Thank you very much for this honor. It’s always fun to be walked on wherever you can be," Bushnell quipped.

Bushnell has hardly given up his passion for playing games, which began in earnest when he was working in an amusement park decades ago. He recently networked 16 televisions throughout his house to play a serious session of the futuristic shoot ’em up Xbox game Halo with his sons and their friends.

Atari’s luster faded as competition in the gaming industry heated up in the 1980s and ’90s. It was among a handful of properties acquired by Infogrames Entertainment SA in 2001.

In 1981, Nintendo developed and began distributing the coin-operated video game "Donkey Kong." Miyamoto was the creator of the game, where the main character Mario sought to save a damsel from Donkey Kong, a giant cartoonish ape.

Donkey Kong soon became the hottest selling arcade game in the business.

Devil May Cry 3: Dante’s Awakening Ships For Playstation 2

Capcom, a powerhouse in the multi-billion dollar video game industry, today announced the return of the world's toughest demon slayer with the release of Devil May Cry3: Dante's Awakening, for the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system. Devil May Cry 3 reintroduces the mysterious hero Dante in a riveting new game marked by complex storylines, striking graphics and unadulterated stylistic action. The game is now available at retailers across North America and carries an "M" rating for mature audiences by the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board).

Several thousand years have passed since the demon warrior Sparda raised his sword against the unholy world to save the human race. Victorious and assured that evil forces had been confined, Sparda joined mankind and fathered Dante, a half human-half demon son infused with the power of a supernatural lineage. However, Dante was not the only son Sparda had sired. As devoted as Dante was to defeating the forces of evil, his twin brother, Vergil, was consumed by power and upheld the legacy of his sinister ancestors. One moonlit night, a mysterious tower materialized beside Dante's "Devil May Cry" investigative agency. On the rooftop stood his brother along with his inhuman minions goading Dante into a confrontation.

Devil May Cry 3 unfolds an earlier chapter in Dante's history, before the original Devil May Cry, to the fateful clash between Sparda's twin sons, divided by the divergence of their chosen paths. Along the way, Dante encounters formidable foes and unusual characters including a mysterious man named Arkham and a female hunter named Lady whose mission is to take down all demons, including Dante. These precursory events disclose the complex roots of Dante's character and reveal insight into his clouded past.

"Devil May Cry 3 packs non-stop thrills and a captivating story line into one technologically advanced package," said Todd Thorson, director of marketing, Capcom Entertainment, Inc. "Action game fans are in for one hell of an experience."

Devil May Cry 3 preserves the fast-paced action that has made the series so popular. In addition to its strong roots, the game increases the intensity of gameplay with a new "style" system, which adds an additional level of depth. Depending on preference, players can choose to use short-range, long-range, defensive or evasive play styles. Each system has its own range of gameplay features and players can choose to power up their favorite style for increased special attack abilities. The range of options available in Devil May Cry 3 immerses players in a non-stop, thrilling escapade.

Devil May Cry 3 includes the following features:

* Unrelenting, hard-core gothic action
* Fresh new character design - Dante appears younger, but still has his stylish swagger and rock star good looks
* Huge arsenal of weapons - Handguns, powerful shotguns, tricked out guitars and much more
* Combo system - Equip Dante with up to four different weapons that can be swapped at anytime, allowing the freedom to develop a range of fighting moves and combinations
* Customize Dante's fighting style
    - Evasive style which allows Dante to deftly dodge enemy attacks with speed and finesse
    - Close-range specialty maximizes the impact of up close attacks with the blade
    - Long-range style that lets Dante blow away enemies with his fire arms

  o Counter attack and guard expertise against strong enemy power
* Enhanced graphics - Fully textured rich backgrounds utilizing 3D polygons as well as real time rendering for in game cut scenes and intro movie
* Multitude of demonic enemies - More ferocious than ever before with powerful weapons, the ability to transform and fly and other challenging surprises
* Obtain orbs throughout the game to purchase new weapons, fighting techniques, increase strength and more
* Dolby Digital and Dolby Pro Logic II support
* Hidden weapons, items, characters, difficulty levels and more

Maryland House Panel Hesitant On Video Game Restrictions

As the two-minute segment of the video game "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" began rolling yesterday in front of the Maryland House of Delegates committee, lawmakers looked impassive, even bored.

After the decapitation, dismemberment and multiple shootings, though, looks of shock and disgust swept the committee room.

"What I saw there had no redeeming social qualities," Del. Michael D. Smigiel Sr. (R-Cecil) told the Judiciary Committee. "I would say it’s pornographic."

Even so, Smigiel and other legislators stopped short of advocating a bill that would ban the sale of such video games to minors. Lawmakers expressed concerns about the constitutionality of such a measure and questioned whether it is necessary, since the industry has been establishing policies to keep youngsters from buying the games.

Proponents of the sale restrictions, similar to those in a measure proposed in the District, argued that the games have incited a wave of violence across the country, contributing to such killings as the slayings at Columbine High School in 1999 and Lee Boyd Malvo’s shootings in the 2002 Washington area sniper killings.

The bill would penalize the sale of violent and sexually explicit video games to minors with a fine of as much as $1,000 and six months in jail - a misdemeanor.

Similar bans are pending before state legislatures across the nation, including those of California, Washington, Georgia and Alabama.

The increasingly realistic graphics and overwhelming popularity of such violent games as "Halo" and the "Grand Theft Auto" series, and games such as "Doom" before them, have given rise to concerns among consumer groups and law enforcement officials that the games are contributing to violence by minors.

They point to the fact that Malvo played Halo regularly before the sniper shootings, according to a witness at Malvo’s December 2003 trial. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine shooters, were obsessive players of "Doom."

Opponents say the Maryland measure, sponsored by Del. Justin D. Ross (D-Prince George’s), runs afoul of the First Amendment. They point to several court rulings in recent years that say the government has no right

to prohibit the sale of violent or sexually explicit material, regardless of how distasteful it is.

Several legislators said yesterday that although they may support the idea of keeping children from violent games, they are uneasy about banning them, even just for minors.

"When you start talking about freedom of speech, you need to be very careful," said Del. Robert A. Zirkin (D-Baltimore County). "There's a lot of things we don't want kids to do. . . . Is the next step prohibiting kids from watching movies where kids drink?"

Proponents believe that the Maryland measure would probably withstand a test in court because the games pose a "public safety hazard," according to Jack Thompson, a lawyer representing the families of several Alabama police officers killed in a shooting by a teenager who Thompson said modeled the killings on a popular video game.

Although federal courts have knocked down similar measures in recent years, the Maryland proposal is different because the games have become so advanced technologically that they are much more potent than older video games, Thompson said.

New studies, he said, have shown that the brains of adolescents and children are particularly susceptible to the interactive violence found in those games.

"This is not a question of taste," Thompson told the committee yesterday. "It is a question of public safety. . . . Nobody among the [nation's] founders would have suggested that children somehow have a right to purchase materials that are harmful to them."

Illinois Moves Toward Banning Some Video Games

Gov. Rod Blagojevich's proposal to bar stores from selling violent and sexually explicit video games to children unanimously passed an Illinois House committee Wednesday, despite concerns that it might be unconstitutional.

Under the proposal, which now goes to the House floor, any store that violated the ban could face misdemeanor charges and fines of up to $5,000.

Blagojevich has been pushing the idea for several months, arguing in town hall meetings and national interviews that the games desensitize children to violence. He says they can lead to anti-social behavior and even obesity.

On Wednesday, he applauded the House civil law committee for approving the "sensible and necessary legislation."

But courts have struck down similar laws in Washington, Missouri and Indiana as too broad and in violation of free speech.

Even some lawmakers who voted for the bill said they were concerned it is too vague.

"This bill does not have clear standards to the people that need to know

what the standards are - the parents, the kids, the clerk, the manager at Best Buy," said Rep. Lou Lang, D-Skokie. "These are people that will not have a clear standard under this bill as to what is or is not OK."

The legislation requires stores to label violent or sexually explicit games with black-and-white stickers reading "18." Stores would have the burden of figuring out which games could legally be sold to minors and which couldn't.

David Vite, president of the Illinois Retail Merchants Association, said the legislation's restrictions on games depicting "human on human violence" could mean that stores can be fined for selling football games to teenagers.

He also questioned the sincerity of the bill's supporters, suggesting they fear that voting against the measure would hurt them in future elections.

"It's pandering, and it's wrong," he said.

Harvard University professor Michael Rich argued Blagojevich's position before the committee Wednesday, saying the law is necessary because kids may act out in real life the violent or sexual behaviors they practice in virtual reality.

"Children are learning from video games," Rich said. "The question is: what are they learning?"

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Google Formally Launches Desktop Search Tool

Google Inc. late on Sunday made its desktop search widely available as it takes on rivals Microsoft Corp. and Yahoo Inc. in the race to help users find e-mail and files stored on computer hard drives.

Google in October was the first major search company to roll out a test version of its desktop search offering.

Google Desktop Search locates e-mail, AOL chat sessions and previously viewed Web pages. It also searches various file types, from PDFs and Microsoft Word files to audio, video and photo files.

Office workers and other computer users previously had few effective tools for finding documents and e-mail buried on their personal computers. Search companies and others have jumped in to fill that void with the hope of replicating the success Web search has enjoyed.

Other companies, including Apple Computer Inc., Ask Jeeves Inc. and Time Warner Inc.'s AOL are eyeing desktop search amid the fierce battle playing

out in the advertising-supported Web search arena.

Microsoft, which recently rolled its own Web search product to attack Google’s dominant position, has offered its own desktop search tool on a trial basis for the last three months.

Microsoft’s desktop search tool, once installed, can be accessed via a Web browser toolbar, the MSN Search Web page and task bar in the Windows operating system.

Yahoo in January released the test version of its desktop search product. Yahoo Desktop Search is based on licensed code from X1 Technologies Inc. and enables users to search 200 types of files including e-mail and attachments, text, pictures, music, and personal contacts.

In response to security and privacy concerns, Google Desktop defaults to not indexing password-protected files such as spreadsheets, although users can turn the feature on. Any file that is indexed is searchable, which led to concerns that secure documents could be viewed by anyone with access to the computer where the documents are stored.

Google also gives users the choice to index secure Web pages, such as those that appear during online banking transactions.

Netscape Captures Eyeballs for AOL

The once-mighty Netscape browser is attempting a comeback. How, you ask? Simple. By combining the best elements of its two leading rivals.

Netscape is out with a test release of version 8.0, and the new browser is nothing like its recent predecessors, which were mostly about fixing bugs and playing catch-up.

I just wish Netscape didn’t constantly try to dispatch me to content from its developer, America Online Inc., or its partners. But more on that later.

More than 90 percent of the world’s surfing is still done on Microsoft Corp.’s Internet Explorer, but many users complain of its numerous security vulnerabilities and lack of modern features like tabbed browsing, which lets you visit multiple Web sites without opening multiple browser windows.

Enter Mozilla Firefox, which debuted last fall to much fanfare. It lacks many of the IE features, like ActiveX, which is often blamed for enabling security breaches, and with its relatively low usage, malicious hackers don’t target Firefox as much. But some sites won’t work with Firefox because they need the IE features.

The new Netscape, which is only available for Windows PCs, addresses the quandary through a regularly updated list of "good" and "bad" sites.

If Netscape deems a site good, a green shield appears and the browser displays the site using the IE software engine that is built into Windows. Netscape figures such sites present little security risk, so why not enable all the features?

I succeeded in accessing Microsoft’s Windows Update site along with the

advanced features of my company’s Web-based Outlook e-mail, neither of which works with Firefox.

Netscape displays a yellow shield when a site is absent from its list. In such cases, deeming Firefox safer, Netscape uses a Firefox engine that is embedded in Netscape’s software.

Red shields along with a warning page appear when sites are on the bad list.

Not only does Netscape use Firefox, thus disabling ActiveX, but it also blocks that site from leaving data trackers called "cookies" and turns off support for Java and JavaScript, which can launch programs designed to steal information or perform other nasty tricks.

In this sense, Netscape is safer than Firefox or IE alone. I ran on all three browsers a site that tries to steal AOL billing information, and only Netscape successfully blocked the program from running.

Whether Netscape uses Firefox or IE, the site appears within the Netscape environment, and you always have access to tabbed browsing. You get IE’s functionality and Firefox’s security when you need them most.

Netscape also sports "multibars," a way to cram the equivalent of 10 toolbars into the space of a single one. Just click on "1," "2" and so on to switch among them. Each is customizable with whatever features you happen to want. Choose from Netscape’s preprogrammed tools, like news headlines or maps, or add your own using Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, a technology for pulling content from sites (A bug that’s supposed to be fixed before the final release in the next several weeks currently prevents you from fully doing so, though).

I particularly liked the feature that lets you check Web-based e-mail from Netscape, AOL, Excite, Gmail, Hotmail, Lycos, Mail.com or Yahoo. You get automatically logged in with a single click, though for now you don’t get alerts for new mail. I did have occasional problems with the auto sign-in, but found the tool useful overall.

Netscape also sports a few improvements to Firefox: It’s easier to open and close tabs and to instantly clear sensitive information like Web sites visited.

And while Firefox has a tool for remembering passwords, Netscape automatically logs you in.

My one major fault with Netscape is, however, a show stopper.

Most of its tools are geared toward generating traffic for AOL properties. The maps tool gets you MapQuest, the movies tool reaches Moviefone. Weather gets you AOL partner WeatherBug.

AOL says other companies, such as Yahoo Inc. and Fandango, are free to develop tools for Netscape, but that’ll take time, limiting choice in the meantime. And while some of the third-party add-ons already developed for Firefox may work with Netscape, the ones I tried didn’t.

Likewise, the built-in search box automatically runs Netscape’s search engine, unlike Firefox, which lets you easily switch among Google, Yahoo and four others, while letting you add hundreds more.

The tools for the other engines weren't done in time for the test release, and even so, switching is more complicated with Netscape.

So until I get more choice, I plan on sticking with Firefox, even if it means occasionally having to run IE for those sites that need it.

Sun Readies StarOffice 8

Sun Microsystems plans to ship StarOffice 8 by the end of August, and to add Russian, Polish, and Dutch versions of the productivity suite within a year after that.

StarOffice, Sun's product to rival Microsoft's Office, is available in 11 languages. To expand the market, Sun plans to add five more language versions within a year after shipping StarOffice 8, the newest version of StarOffice, says Michael Bemmer, director of software engineering for StarOffice at Sun.

Sun selected Russian, Polish, and Dutch as three of the five additional languages for StarOffice 8. The company is still debating the two other language versions, Bemmer says. He spoke in an interview at the CeBIT trade show here.

Sun released a beta test version of StarOffice 8 last month at the LinuxWorld event in Boston. The update promises better interoperability with Microsoft's Office product and an improved look and feel.

"Ease of use is one of our main topics, lowering the training costs for new users and easing the migration" from Microsoft Office to StarOffice, says Bemmer.

StarOffice 8 succeeds StarOffice 7, which was released in late 2003. Over 40 million StarOffice licenses have been sold since Sun acquired StarOffice maker Star Division in 1999, says Carsten Muller, a product marketing manager at Sun.

StarOffice 7 sells for $80 per copy. Volume licenses are available. Sun also sells StarOffice as part of its Java Desktop System suite, which also includes the Linux operating system and the Mozilla Web browser.

StarOffice is based on OpenOffice.org, a free open source Office suite, for which Sun says it does over 90 percent of the engineering work. StarOffice and OpenOffice.org together hold about 7 percent of the installed Office suite market, Muller says.

StarOffice is currently available in Chinese (simplified and traditional), Korean, Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, and Swedish. The beta of StarOffice 8 is available for download, in English only.

EBay Launches Kijiji Global Classifieds

EBay has launched a network of free classified ad Web sites in six

countries. The new network will operate under the name Kijiji, which means "village" in Swahili.

The strategy was unveiled after eBay acquired several similar classified sites in other countries over the past year. For this first wave of classifieds, sites have been developed for Canada, China, France, Germany, Italy and Japan.

No U.S. move is planned as yet because eBay has noted that start-up darling Craigslist.org has a firm foothold in the online classified market here. Last year, eBay bought a 25 percent stake in Craigslist.

EBay has noted that it would ideally like to replicate the Craigslist model in other countries, according to news reports.

Craigslist grew organically from a stripped-down community site developed by San Francisco resident Craig Newmark about 10 years ago. Since then, the site has developed into a repository of local information for over 100 cities.

"When we think about changes to the site, we ask the community what they think," Newmark told CIO Today. "I'm obsessed with the idea of a moral compass, and how that translates into what we do. What drives us is the idea of people doing the right thing for each other."

If eBay can extend Newmark's thinking into the global community, the effect could be as successful as Craigslist. News reports have noted that Craigslist has taken a significant bite out of newspaper classifieds revenue in the cities it serves.

Kijiji.com acts in a similar fashion to newspaper classifieds as well, with a place for users to buy and sell goods and services for free from others in their area.

The site runs in contrast to eBay's trading site, which brings together buyers and sellers from different geographic locations. Also a difference from eBay's main service is that Kijiji listings are free, which is notable in light of new fee increases on eBay's trading site.

Kijiji was officially launched on February 28th, but eBay has not disclosed how many people have used the site since then. The company has said that Kijiji is not expected to affect 2005 revenue.

EBay has not disclosed how Kijiji might bring in revenue, but has noted that the company might find a way to monetize some of its aspects in the future.

Possible Domain Poisoning Underway

Security experts late Friday warned that a DNS cache poisoning attack may be underway and redirecting users from some of the most popular Web sites to a malicious URL where spyware and adware is invisibly installed onto their computers.

According to the Internet Storm Center, which posted an alert on its Web site, it had received reports that the attack was redirecting traffic from popular domains such as google.com, ebay.com, and weather.com.

DNS cache poisoning occurs when an attacker hacks into a domain name server, then "poisons" the cache by planting counterfeit data in the cache of the name server. When a user requests, say, ebay.com, and the IP address is resolved by the hacked domain server, the bogus data is fed back to the browser.

Another tactic, dubbed "DNS hijacking," is similar, but simply changes the domain server so that traffic is actually re-routed.

It’s unclear which of the two tactics this attack is using.

Even security firms had difficulty confirming the attack, however. Dan Hubbard, the senior director of security at San Diego-based Websense, for instance, said that his team had been investigating the report for several hours but had not yet been able to hit a domain server that had been poisoned.

But Websense’s monitoring of its customer’s usage patterns did pick up a spike in traffic to the three malicious sites supposedly feeding spyware to redirected users. (In turn, the three feed users to one single site.)

"It’s circumstantial evidence," he said, "but it seems something is going on."

Nor was Hubbard able to confirm the targets of the poison and/or hijack. "We haven’t been able to trace a redirect from, say, Google," he added.

The hack could be quite localized if, for instance, the affected domain server was one operated by an enterprise or small Internet service provider. "It’s certainly not at the root level, or we’d all end up at this malicious site."

Domain cache poisoning and domain hijacking, while rare, are not unheard of. In the late 1990s, a vulnerability in BIND (Berkeley Internet Name Domain), the software used by nearly all of the name servers on the Internet, was disclosed. A few exploits followed. And in 2000, RSA Security was victimized by a Web defacement that really wasn’t: instead, domain cache poisoning simply fed bogus pages to users.

"One interesting thing about malicious Web sites is that the hackers have to get people to the site," said Hubbard. "How they get people to their sites is becoming very important. In this case, they’re getting more creative than the traditional phishing or instant messaging approach where links are sent to users."

The adware and spyware on the malicious sites is thankfully "not very dangerous," said Hubbard. The sites try to download and install code and an Active X control called "ABC Search Webinstall" that changes the browser’s toolbar, its home page, and search preferences, among other things.

For additional details of the attack as they become available, refer to the Internet Storm Center’s Diary page, which promises to update as the Center finds out more.

Proposed Utah Law Has ISPs Up in Arms

A proposed Utah bill that would force Internet service providers to filter and block any material and Web sites deemed "harmful to minors" has ISPs and advocacy groups up in arms, claiming unconstitutionality on several grounds.

In addition to requiring ISPs to prevent access of Internet materials considered harmful to minors, the bill requires ISPs to block material on the adult content registry and to "properly" rate the data.

The bill also directs Utah's Division of Consumer Protection to test the effectiveness of a service provider's procedures to block material harmful to minors on an annual basis.

Several groups have weighed in on the proposed bill, voicing a variety of concerns. The CDT (Center for Democracy and Technology), a Washington-based digital advocacy group, argues that Utah's bill raises serious constitutional issues and is likely to withstand legal challenges if signed into law.

The bill is troubling in many ways, said John Morris, staff counsel at the CDT. First and foremost, an attempt by ISPs to comply with the law by blocking access to content would be simply unconstitutional, he said.

Morris likened Utah's bill to a similar bill introduced in Pennsylvania in 2003. In Pennsylvania's case, the statute blocked access to Internet sites accused of carrying child pornography. The result, according to a suit filed by a Pennsylvania ISP along with the CDT and the ACLU of Pennsylvania, would have been the blocking of innocent Web sites.

The court struck down Pennsylvania's statute in September of 2004, noting that it violated the First Amendment and the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

In some ways, Utah's bill is even more egregious than Pennsylvania's, said Morris, who was lead counsel in the Pennsylvania suit.

"The Pennsylvania law was targeted at a type of content everybody agrees is inappropriate-child pornography. But the Utah law is targeted at much broader content that, by definition, is legal content-material that is lawful for adults but arguably harmful to minors," he said.

First amendment issues certainly will be raised if the Utah bill is signed into law, said Samir Jain, a partner in the telecom and Internet/ecommerce practice of Washington-based Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP.

"Generally, under First Amendment law, the notion of a prior restraint, which is blocking speech beforehand as opposed to awarding a remedy afterwards, is disfavored," he said. "By requiring the blocking of speech, the statute might constitute such a prior restraint."

The bill also would require ISPs to either block certain content or provide filtering software to users. Blocking access to content could lead to blocking innocent and unrelated Web sites or blocking access to Web sites by customers who do not request blocking.

"ISPs see themselves as conduits to information and want to let users decide what information they want to access," Jain noted. "They don't want to be in a position of deciding what's good content and what's bad content."

Another of the bills likely to be found unconstitutional, the CDT said, is a section requiring content providers to label their content-something the organization believes constitutes a government-imposed censorship of speech.

"People can’t be forced to self-label their own speech, because there are different views of what is harmful to minors," Morris said.

A CDT memo on the subject pointed out that if signed into law, the bill will increase the cost of doing business in Utah for ISPs, potentially putting many out of business. In addition, it is likely to cause economic harm to Utah businesses that provide Internet and Web hosting services as well, the memo said.

NetCoalition, a group of ISPs that includes Yahoo Inc. and Google Inc. as well as ISP associations of many states, also opposes the bill. The group sent a letter to the state Senate complaining that the vague wording of the bill could inadvertently impact search engines, e-mail providers and Web hosting companies.

The bill has already received approval from the Utah Senate, and unless industry groups make their case, Utah Governor Jon Huntsman is expected to sign the bill by March 22.

FTC Says Anti-Spyware Vendor Shut Down

A software vendor that tried to drum up sales by offering to clean up nonexistent computer "spyware" has been temporarily shut down, U.S. regulators said on Friday.

The makers of Spyware Assassin tried to scare consumers into buying software through pop-up ads and e-mail that warned their computers had been infected with malicious monitoring software, the Federal Trade Commission said.

Free spyware scans offered by Spokane, Washington-based MaxTheater Inc. turned up evidence of spyware even on machines that were entirely clean, and its $29.95 Spyware Assassin program did not actually remove spyware, the FTC said.

A U.S. court has ordered the company and its owner, Thomas Delanoy, to suspend its activities until a court hearing on Tuesday. The company could be required to give back all the money it made from selling Spyware Assassin.

Hands Off the Web, Bloggers and Lawmakers Say

Internet bloggers should enjoy traditional press freedoms and not face regulation as political groups, lawmakers and online journalists said on Friday.

In separate letters, Democratic lawmakers and Internet commentators urged the Federal Election Commission to make sure that political Web sites that

serve as focal points for political discussion, like Wonkette.com and Freerepublic.com, don’t have to comply with campaign-finance rules.

"Curtailing blogs and other online publications will dampen the impact of new voices in the political process and will do a disservice to the millions of voters who rely on the Web for original, insightful political commentary," said the Online Coalition, a group of bloggers and online activists.

Fourteen members of the U.S. House of Representatives said blogs foster a welcome diversity of viewpoints.

"This ’democratization’ of the media is a welcome development in this era of media consolidation and a corresponding lack of diversity of views in traditional media outlets," said the group, which consists of thirteen Democrats and one Republican.

The FEC ruled in 2002 that Internet activities do not count as "coordinated political activity" and thus don’t have to comply with laws that regulate money in politics.

But a U.S. judge struck down that ruling as too broad last year, and the FEC is scheduled to consider it later this month.

If the FEC determines that online "blogs" are in fact political organizations, they could face fines if they work too closely with political campaigns by, for example, reprinting their press releases.

FEC spokesman Bob Biersack said the commission would try to craft its new rule as narrowly as possible.

"The Commission has tried very hard for a long time to be as limited in its regulation of Internet activity as it possibly could, so there’s no reason to assume that that basic orientation doesn’t continue," he said.

Apple Wins Trade Secrets Legal Dispute

A judge on Fritday ordered three independent online reporters to divulge confidential sources in a lawsuit brought by Apple Computer Inc., ruling that they were not protected by the First Amendment because they published trade secrets.

The ruling alarmed speech advocates, who saw the case as a test of whether people who write for Web publications enjoy the same legal protections as reporters for mainstream publications. Among those are protections afforded under California’s "shield" law, which is meant to encourage the publication of information in the public’s interest.

The reporters - who run sites followed closely by Apple enthusiasts - allegedly published product descriptions that Apple said employees had leaked in violation of nondisclosure agreements and possibly the U.S. Trade Secrets Act.

Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge James Kleinberg ruled that no one has the right to publish information that could have been provided only by someone breaking the law.

"The rumor and opinion mills may continue to run at full speed," Kleinberg wrote. "What underlies this decision is the publishing of information that at this early stage of the litigation fits squarely within the definition of trade secret.

"The right to keep and maintain proprietary information as such is a right which the California Legislature and courts have long affirmed and which is essential to the future of technology and innovation generally."

In December, Apple sued several unnamed individuals, called "Does," who leaked specifications about a pending music software - code-named "Asteroid" - to Monish Bhatia, Jason O'Grady and another person who writes under the pseudonym Kasper Jade. Their articles appeared in the online publications Apple Insider and PowerPage.

Apple demanded that Bhatia, O'Grady and Jade divulge their sources. The reporters refused to cooperate, saying that identifying their sources would create a "chilling effect" that could erode the media's ability to report in the public's interest.

The online reporters could not immediately be reached for comment Friday but have said they would consider appealing a decision favoring Apple.

Apple Insider and PowerPage have hundreds of thousands of monthly visitors and generate revenue through advertisements, but they are a fraction of the size of more established publications covering the computer industry.

The journalists have said Apple is trying to curtail their First Amendment rights because they lack the legal and financial resources that mainstream publications have to fight such information requests. Other trade publications wrote about the music technology after the reporters broke the story online.

"Apple is using this case as a desperate attempt to silence the masses of bloggers and online journalists that it cannot control but feels it can intimidate," Jade, who has been writing about Apple for more than eight years, wrote in an e-mail earlier this week. "Online publications are typically not backed by commercially funded organizations - a weak spot Apple most certainly recognized prior to filing its suits. The company hopes that it can stop or chill the Apple-news industry with its threats."

Feds Crack Down on Software Piracy Sites

Three members of a global computer piracy ring admitted Thursday they shuttled millions of dollars in computer games, movies and software around the world through a coded system of Web sites and chat rooms.

The men pleaded guilty in U.S. District court to federal copyright charges, becoming the first people convicted in what the U.S. Justice Department said was the largest-ever investigation into software piracy.

Their arrests came after FBI agents in New Haven spent more than a year looking into the underground "Warez" community on the Internet.

"It's a competition of different groups racing to release pirated software over the Internet," said Seth Kleinberg, a 26-year-old Los Angeles man who, with a high-school education and a home computer, cracked the computer

industry’s toughest copyright protections.

Kleinberg, who lives with his dad, faces between five and six years in prison when he is sentenced in July.

He pleaded guilty along with Jeffrey Lerman, 20, a University of Maryland student from Long Island, and Albert Bryndza, 32 of New York.

The investigation, dubbed "Operation Higher Education" spanned across the United States and about a dozen foreign countries, prosecutors said.

The FBI recently built a state-of-the-art computer crimes facility in the New Haven field office to handle Internet investigations.

Internet Becomes A Major Political News Source

Last year was a breakout year for the Internet in American politics, surpassing radio, and in some cases newspapers, as an important source of campaign news, a research firm says.

Fully 75 million Americans, or 37 percent of the adult population, used the Internet in 2004 to get political news and information, discuss candidates and debate issues in emails, or participate directly in the political process by volunteering or giving contributions to candidates, the Pew Internet and American Life Project said in a recent report. When considering only online Americans, the percentage using the Internet in politics jumped to 61 percent.

The percentage of consumers who went online last year for political news jumped to 29 percent of the general population from 18 percent in 2000. Among Internet users, the percentages grew to 52 percent from 33 percent, respectively.

The Internet in 2004 surpassed radio as a prime source of campaign news, with 28 percent of Internet users listing the web versus 17 percent citing radio. Among broadband users, 38 percent cited the Internet as a major source of political news, compared to 36 percent who chose newspapers.

In using the Internet more for politics, online Americans were positive in their view of the web. Among those who get political news online, 56 percent said the Internet had "raised the overall quality of public debate." Among all Internet users, 49 percent agreed with that statement.

In the presidential race, 53 percent of the people who said they got political news from the Internet voted for Republican George W. Bush versus 47 percent for Democratic challenger John Kerry.

As to the reason the Internet has become so popular a political news source, more than half of online Americans cited the convenience.

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